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ABSTRACT

The Fact and Fiction Research Project, funded by the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) and based at the School of Education, University of Southampton (England), completed a 2-year study into gender and reading in the 7-9 age group. The project, designed to address boys' underachievement in English by reviewing their development as readers at home and in school, tracked about 120 children in the 7-9 age group in four different schools. The schools chosen were in London and in Hampshire to provide broad contrasts in social catchment. Findings suggest that factors which impact on underachievement vary between boys and girls, and according to their general standing as readers. A key issue for intervention at the bottom (the "can't yet read/don't yet read" non-readers) is building basic competence; a key issue for intervention at the top (the "can do/don't" readers) is that intervening to help this group should substantially impact on levels of reading achievement across the class. The research was completed before the advent of the National Literacy Strategy, and the introduction of the National Literacy Hour presents a new context for tackling some of the issues raised. (NKA)

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Raising Attainment: Boys, Reading and the National Literacy Hour Interim Findings from the Fact and Fiction Research Project.

by Gemma Moss

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Raising Attainment: Boys, Reading and the National Literacy Hour
Interim Findings from the Fact and Fiction Research Project

Dr Gemma Moss, Centre for Language in Education, University of Southampton

Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference, University of Sussex, at Brighton, 2-5 September, 1999.

Presented in conjunction with Boys, Reading and the National Literacy Hour, a contribution to the Symposium on language and policy in British education,

The Fact and Fiction Research Project,[1] funded by the ESRC and based at the School of Education, University of Southampton, has just completed a two year study into gender and reading in the 7-9 age group. The project was designed to address boys' underachievement in English by reviewing their development as readers at home and in school.

Quantitative research of long-standing shows that boys do less well at reading than girls; they read fewer books and much less fiction. These patterns intensify with age. This evidence is now being linked to boys' underachievement in education more generally.

The Fact and Fiction Project examined boys' development as readers at home and in school at the point when children begin to read independently in order to throw light on the following issues:

1) Whether boys' preferences for factual genres rather than fiction impact on their progress in reading;

2) How differences between boy and girl readers emerge and are sustained both at home and in school;

3) How the social contexts for reading at home and in school impact on boys' progress as readers

4) The potential for expanding the range of texts on the primary school curriculum and the ways in which they are used, so that levels of achievement can be enhanced.

The project tracked approximately 120 children in the 7-9 age group in four different schools. The schools were chosen in London and Hampshire to provide broad contrasts in social catchment. Coincidentally, on the basis of their record, two of the schools we were working with (one with a largely middle class, one with a largely working class, catchment area) were identified nationally as centres of excellence, and invited to take part in the first wave of school-based initial teacher training (SCITTs). Of the other two, one of the schools had been designated an entrant to the National Literacy Project (NLP) but was overtaken by the timetable for the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy. All the schools showed similar patterns of gender differentiated achievement at KS1.

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Project findings

1. Patterns of gender differentiation in boy and girl readers in school [ii]

1.1 In all the schools the project was working with the reading curriculum was dominated by concerns for reading proficiency. In many different ways schools spell out to children, parents and other interested parties that how well pupils do at reading matters. Perhaps especially in schools with few extra curricular resources to call on, where parents' own educational levels are low, anxiety about how children are getting on with reading is high. Boys and girls seem to react differently to this state of affairs. Contrasts here seemed more central to understanding boys' and girls' different progress as readers than, for instance, the inclusion of their preferred reading materials on the school curriculum; or the presence or absence of gender-specific adult role models of reading.

1.2 The Fact and Fiction Project targeted the 7-9 age group for research because Key Stage 2 is the point where children begin to take off into independent reading. Teachers' expectations are that increasing numbers of pupils will no longer be in need of support from carefully chosen texts which match their level of reading competence. In all of the classrooms we observed, teachers made judgements about which children were "fully competent readers", and which children could not yet be treated in this way. Those in the first category were often offered a wider range of reading materials, and could exercise more free choice over what and how they read. Those in the second category were often constrained in terms of the material they could read. In the latter case, there was more concern on the part of teachers to match the text to the child's assessed level of competence, and in this way help them gradually build on their repertoire of reading skills.

On the project, we divided the children we observed into three categories: readers who **can and do** read freely; those who **can but don't** read freely; and those who **can't yet and don't** read freely. The distinction between **can** and **can't** is based on the teacher's judgement about who is competent to read independently and who is not yet there. These decisions had immediate consequences for the children involved in the classroom in terms of their experience of the reading curriculum. **Do** and **don't**, on the other hand, records a different kind of judgement the project made about the way in which children exercised their competence. Some of those children who were deemed to be "free readers" clearly had a lot invested in their sense of themselves as readers. They were beginning to exercise independent judgement about what they wanted to read and the kind of reader they were. They were reading in a self-motivated way, for themselves, not just for the teacher or as part of the work undertaken in school. By contrast, others who were deemed competent at reading by the teacher, and accorded the same privileges in terms of what they read, showed little inclination to read for themselves. They read when it was reading time in class, but seldom went beyond what was asked of them. They showed little commitment to reading as an activity. Quantitative data collected by Frank Whitehead in the 1970's and since born out by other research of a similar scale, shows that this group - competent readers who do not exercise that skill - increases with age, and that more of them are boys than girls (Whitehead et al, 1977; Children's Literature Research Centre, 1996).

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In the project data there are more boys than girls in the **can't yet/don't** category; more boys than girls in the **can/don't** category. This is consistent with the picture from existing quantitative data. At each level the project has focused on exploring the differences between the boy and girl readers who fall into each of these categories, as well as what they may share.

1.3 **Can't yet/don't readers**

Can't yet/don't readers have not yet acquired the classroom status of "free readers", able to read independently for themselves. They are still seen as lacking in the full range of competencies necessary for reading in this way. As a result they often have fewer opportunities to develop their own tastes and their own commitment to reading for themselves. The project found the differences between boy and girl readers in this category were heightened or weakened according to the ways in which the school organised the reading curriculum. There were two key distinctions here:

1) classrooms where proficiency judgements about children's status as readers - the degree of competence they show at reading - were made highly visible to all those involved;
2) classrooms where proficiency judgements about children's status as readers were much less visible as part of the daily routine in class.

Where proficiency judgements are made highly visible, weaker boy readers, unlike weaker girl readers, spend an inordinate amount of time in flight from such judgements. They put a lot of energy into disguising their lower status, and escaping from the consequences of that designation. This is not the case for weaker girl readers.

Proficiency judgements about children as readers can be made highly visible in the public domain by: the ways in which ability groupings are deployed in class; the ways in which monitoring and tracking of individual children's progress is carried out; the different kinds of privileges and access to texts accorded to able readers; the limited use of resources accorded to less able readers. They can also be strongly signalled by the nature of the texts readers read.

Crucially, fiction texts for children are always proficiency graded by the publishers. This is the case whether they are part of a reading scheme or not. Publishers grade their stock through: the point size of type used; the relative density of the lines of type; the length of the book; the relative mix of pictures to verbal text. They market their stock by employing such distinctions consistently in different series - Read Alones, for example, stand midway between readers and fully fledged Chapter Books. Booksellers, libraries, schools, can all reinforce these distinctions by the ways in which they organise their stock, and in the case of schools, give access to it. When children pick up a fiction text they always signal something about their proficiency as readers.

By contrast, non-fiction texts, especially those not specifically designed for classroom use, often eschew proficiency grading, or masquerade as adult texts. Dorling Kindersley's non-fiction texts, such as the popular **Eyewitness** series, are a case in point. In terms of layout, print density, point size, they signal an adult rather than child readership. When able to choose freely, these kinds of texts were also the most popular with weaker boy readers.

Non-fiction texts allow weaker boy readers to escape others' judgements about how well they read, how competent they are. They enable them to maintain self-esteem in the combative environment of their peer group relationships. Steering round these texts via the pictures, and ignoring the verbal text, weaker readers can nevertheless stake out territory as "experts", on a level with peers who read more competently.

These kind of strategies, coupled with their desire to mask their failing as readers, lead weaker boy readers to spend less time on verbal text. Weaker girl readers seem to find less contradiction between the teacher's judgement of their proficiency, and their own sense of self-worth. They are less anxious to escape from "easy books" and consequently are prepared to spend more time reading them. Yet paradoxically as a result they may get little experience of more demanding books.

The status that children are accorded in class as readers matters differently to boys than to girls. The project data suggests that weaker boy readers opt for non-fiction, not as a rejection of "feminine" narrative forms, but because non-fiction texts allow them to make claims about their own status as experts, which crucially don't depend on their having read the text at all, but rather allow them to stake out territory amongst their peers.

Where proficiency judgements about children's status as readers are not so strongly signalled in the class, it is often much less obvious to weaker readers, whether boys or girls, what good readers do, or what they themselves should be aspiring to. Gender differentiation may be less, but underachievement across the board remains a substantial concern.

1.4 **Can/don't readers**

Can/don't readers are those who are deemed fully competent by teachers to read independently, but seldom seem to exercise this skill for themselves. They show little commitment to texts, or the activity of reading, though when asked, they are able to adequately satisfy the requirements of most school reading tasks. They often attempt only a limited range of texts, and are more likely to abandon a book rather than finish it.

Identifying the **can/don't** readers from the **can/do** readers in class is not always straight-forward. In part, the kinds of record keeping used in the classroom often don't allow this kind of judgement to be made with any accuracy. Provided a child is filling in a reading record, and seen to be reading at the times when they should, then that is often as far as it goes. Besides, boys who actually don't bother much with reading often look as if they do. Take for instance the Year 5 boy in the project data

who owned 31 Goosebump titles, and was often to be found in school showing them to other boys, passing them round, and indeed flicking through them. However, he was actually treating the books as objects to collect rather than read, and had only managed to get through 3 of the 31 titles.

There are fewer **can/don't** girl readers in the project data. Those that there are are much less obvious that the **can/don't** boy readers. Perhaps because they are more prepared to play the part at school and talk as if they were committed readers, even when the activity itself takes a low priority outside the classroom. They are much less likely to make a display of their reluctance to read.

Does it really matter that competent readers don't spend much time on the activity? Perhaps the answer partly emerges from looking at the **can/do** readers. (See below)

1.5 **Can/do readers**

Can/do readers meet the competency thresholds at school, and then make full use of the opportunities afforded them to read widely there and at home. They have a strong sense of themselves as readers, and can steer the direction of their own reading in a purposeful way.

More girls than boys fall into the **can/do** reader category. The project data suggests a strong link between boys with this profile, and parents who see themselves as readers, regardless of the gender of the parent who reads. This would imply that it is home rather than school which currently encourages boys to make a firm commitment to reading. For girls, there seems to be a weaker connection between patterns of adult reading in the home and their development as readers. Girls can get to be fully committed readers via their peers, and via school in the absence of much help from home. Boys don't seem to take this route. This also implies that currently where this kind of support is not forthcoming at home, boys will flounder. Schools can and should address this issue.

Why should there be this difference between boy and girl readers? Quantitative data shows that girls network more around texts. They are much more likely to use friends' recommendations to guide their reading, and share what they have read with others, too. Boys network less around texts. Those who read for themselves develop tastes which are often quite specialised and different from their friends. When texts become an object of common interest for boys they are used quite differently. Boys demonstrate what they already know about a subject, using the text as prompt. They may compare collections, in terms of who owns the most - the most stickers in a football album, for instance. The text becomes an object for competitive play, rather than something they actually spend time reading. From this point of view the attempt to lure boys into reading by surrounding them with texts which already have this kind of currency seems misguided. They are often precisely those texts which from the boys' perspective simply don't require much close attention.

1.6 The common-sense view of why boys do less well at reading starts from the assumption that either boys' preferences in reading material are insufficiently represented on the curriculum; or that boys see too few men reading to aspire to being readers themselves. Neither position is borne out by the Fact and Fiction Project data. Instead boys and girls react differently to their status as readers, as it unfolds in class and at home. This situation leads overall to more boys than girls spending less time on their reading, and developing a less strong sense of commitment to the activity.

In the light of the project data, schools could intervene to help change these patterns. The structures in place as part of the National Literacy Strategy may well facilitate re-thinking the organisation of the reading curriculum in ways which would address the issues identified above.

2.0 Making a difference

2.1 The findings outlined above suggest that factors which impact on underachievement vary between boys and girls, and according to their general standing as readers. It is important to bear these differences in mind as they suggest different kinds of interventions and possible solutions.

2.2 Intervening at the bottom: the **can't yet/don't** readers

A key issue for this group is building basic competence. The Fact and Fiction Project was not designed to evaluate which methods worked best to achieve this aim. In any case, in terms of teaching basic competence in reading, many teachers are already well-versed in a range of strategies, and the kinds of emphasis on word, sentence and text level work within the National Literacy Strategy will help ensure that the full spectrum of competencies involved receives the attention it is due.

However, the work of the Fact and Fiction Project suggests that in and of itself such an approach may not be enough. Early reports that it is girls rather than boys who are benefiting most from the NLP seem to bear this out. The project data suggests that issues surrounding their own perceived status as readers play a key role in

a) the amount of time readers spend on texts
b) the level of difficulty of text they are prepared to tackle
c) how they come to see themselves as readers and the consequences this has for what they do.

If many boys at the bottom end find ways to avoid spending the necessary time on text, girls in such a position may be too prepared to put up with undemanding reading material which does not stretch them. The National Literacy Hour provides the opportunity, if well used, to present children with a range of material at word, sentence and text level which stretches their competence, and which is open to all within the class. Further attention still needs to be paid to finding ways to challenge the status politics of boys' peer group culture and intervene to replace, rather than reinforce, its negative side. This is a whole class issue.

2.3 Intervening at the top: the **can/don't** readers

Intervening to help this group should substantially impact on levels of reading achievement across the class. But this also means clarifying what our aspirations for readers are. The reading curriculum should be capable of preparing young people to tackle a wide range of texts, in a range of different media, intelligently and critically. Essentially it should enable them to put their reading competence to good use. From this point of view the reluctance of many girls in our data to engage with non-fiction texts is just as worrying as the reluctance of young boys to spend time reading.

The project suggests that what is needed here is not better policing of time spent reading, or more exhortations to parents to take an interest in what their children do, but rather a much firmer commitment on schools' part to build and sustain a reading culture which can encompass the full range of interests in the class, but also substantially expand them.

The best practice we have seen, which seemed to have a real impact on what children were doing as readers, gave children considerable freedom to explore different kinds of texts in different ways and for different purposes, alongside highly structured opportunities to talk and write about their reading together. Teacher input was crucial to this endeavour, coupled with a substantial knowledge of what kinds of texts are available and what new avenues for reading could be explored. One teacher addressed a good deal of her practice to the **can/don't** readers. She recognised that they needed more input to take them on. By singling them out, and targeting her teaching efforts on them, she also benefited the class as a whole. The **can/do** readers benefited from a public forum in which to share what they already knew; the **can't yet/don't** readers got a much clearer idea of what reading could be and why it was worth spending time on the endeavour. There are many ways of achieving this aim, once schools make a firm commitment to this as a goal. The structure of the literacy hour provides an ideal forum in which to take this aim forward in a way which should help both girls and boys.

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[i] The Fact and Fiction Project Team members were Gemma Moss and Dena Attar.

[ii] The Fact and Fiction Project finished collecting data before the advent of the National Literacy Strategy and the introduction of the National Literacy Hour. However, the findings have implications for the implementation of the hour and the development of a broader literacy curriculum, in the current context.

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